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ABSTRACT

This survey of the state-of-the-art of research and theory in the study of intercultural communication considers the following areas: history of the field, clients, basic assumptions, derivations of the ideas in the field, research methodology, available resources, and predictions for the future. The paper notes that the field of intercultural communication places the highest priority on immediate practicality and intervention; therefore, research and theory are underdeveloped. Such research and theory generally must begin with a recognition on the part of the researchers that understanding the processes of intercultural communication may call for skepticism about what is believed about communication in general. The complexity of any one intercultural communication and the diversity of the intercultural communications of all the subcultures of the world present a great challenge for study. The paper includes a selected bibliography of publications on intercultural communication. (GW)

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RESEARCH AND THEORY IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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This survey of the State-of-the-Art of research and theory of intercultural communciation considers the history of this research and theory, the clients, assumptions, ideas, methods, resources, and projections into the future. This survey is partly a product of a two and a half hour discussion by twenty-five participants in a session of the third annual conference of The Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research.[1]

1. History

A small part of this history is recorded in books and publications; a larger part is still in various minds as practical experience. Moreover, much of this research and theory is not yet ready for history; the investigations and explanations are too underdeveloped and underorganized.

In the last two or three years, at least a dozen books on intercultural communication have appeared, including several sets of readings. In addition to these readily available and helpful volumes, George Renwick and also Ned Seelye and Lynn Tyler have compiled large bibliographies from which a history of writings could be developed. Discussions with a score of people make it clear, however, that much of the research and theory has not yet found its way into print. This is largely due to the field being action oriented. Even

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1. The participants were: N. Asúncion-Lande, Njoku E. Awa, Mary Kenny Badami, Bernard Blackman, Christine Button, Pierre P. Casse, Carter H. Collins, Wayne Gosnell, Patricia A. Grim, Tom Kochman, Ann C. Kong, W. Leonard Lee, Howard H. Martin, Nathaniel Mays, Emma Papazian, Michael Prosser, Nancy Radtke, James E. Redden, Carol Saltzman, William Shaw, K. S. Sitaram, Alfred G. Smith (session chairman and organizer), V. Lynn Tyler, and T. S. Yamashita.

the purely academic researchers and theorists are largely involved in training practitioners.

This also means that the field is underdeveloped. Practitioners complain that there is a shortage of materials on research and theory that can help them in the field. At the same time everyone laments that he does not know what other people are doing in this field. The field is underdeveloped because what one person has found out has not been shared with others. To some extent there has been no channel for sharing such as a clearing house or journal. Thus the field may also be underorganized. Research and theory in intercultural communication involves anthropology, linguistics, political science, and a whole host of traditional academic fields. This scatter has not been brought together and structured into a recognized or recognizable discipline.

A non-thing does not have a history. An emerging thing may not yet have a history.

2. Clients

In one form or another practically all the clients are students of one sort or another. They may be teachers who are learning to teach other teachers, or they may be potential missionaries or administrators, or they may be learning to do further research and theory themselves. Most of these students have had substantial experiential learning in the practice of intercultural communication. They are now studying research and theory in order to provide a more solid base for what they know and a more integrated framework for their orientations.

Their first priority is practice. They look for what they can use immediately or indirectly. They are generally oriented to improving their skills in intercultural communication. For this they study languages, cultures, and theories. They are less interested in theories and research as purely intellectual or academic interests. Their primary concern is the improvement of such things as adult education or even the analysis of Hollywood films to advise the producers what these films mean in Iran.

Some of us may hope that their concerns will develop longer and longer perspectives, but at this time we need to recognize that most of them place highest priority on immediate practicality.

3. Assumptions

Research and theory in intercultural communication generally begins with recognizing the possibility that we may be ethnocentric. Many of our ideas are ingrown and not very outgrown. To understand processes of intercultural communication may call for scepticism about what we understand of communication in general.

A second assumption is that intercultural communication is generally not between two whole cultures. Americans do not negotiate with Arabs, for there are no Arabs in general but many different kinds of Arabs, just as there are many different kinds of Americans.

This implies the next assumption: intercultural communication is much more complex than one would think. It involves differences in language, in nonverbal codes, and billions of bits of information. Many times what seems

to be insignificant becomes very significant in determining intercultural understanding. We can trip over minor taboos and totems, or find that what we call meat is quite different from what a Canadian Indian may think of as meat.

We need culture dictionaries and grammers. These will be much broader than linguistic dictionaries and grammers, and may fall under a general heading of linguetics and linguemics. We may first need grammers and dictionaries for individual languages such as English and Arabic. We need to broaden each of these to include more than just words, and narrow them to be specific to the subcultures in each group. This is only the beginning. We next need to develop intercultural grammers between English and Arabic subcultures. What more general frame of reference can we use for communicating between, for example, the English and Arabic orientations? Finally we need some meta-intercultural grammar under which specific bi-cultural interactions among any two cultures can be formulated.

The complexity of any one intercultural communication, and the diversity of intercultural communications among all the different subcultures of the world present a great challenge to theory and research. Many people assume that we do not even know where to begin.

4. Ideas

Assumptions that lead Lynn Tyler and his colleagues at Brigham Young to coin such new terms as linguetics and linguemics lead directly into some of the ideas and concepts of research and theory in intercultural communication.

These ideas borrow not only from linguistics but from all the other many fields that comprise this interdisciplinary operation. Some ideas come from anthropology, others from communication, and still others from all the disciplines known on university campuses. Just as intercultural communication itself is in a sense a higher order of culture, such as a third culture, above the pairs of cultures that may interact, so intercultural theory and research is of an order in its interdisciplinariness higher than any one or another of the disciplines from which it borrows.

One idea that was originally in the social sciences is that of indicators. Social indicators are clues to the direction of social movements in general. Intercultural communicator indicators are meta-communicational signals that indicate the nature of the communication. A single gesture can cancel paragraphs of words. Naturally, these indicators are parts of culture grammars.

Another kind of idea comes from the field of education. In elementary schools different pupils have different kinds of readiness to learn. There are even special programs to promote this. The clients of theory and research in intercultural communication are also students and they too may have different kinds of readiness to learn, particularly to learn different kinds of things. Some students may think some things are important but not others, that some people may regard language to be a big problem while others do not. We need more research and theory on readiness to learn intercultural communication.

A related idea from education is transfer of training. When someone has had a sucessful tour of duty as a Peace Corp Volunteer in Peru, will that

experience help him succeed in a comparable job in the inner city of an American metropolis? Some experiences are perhaps a hindrance while others are a help. We need to discover which is which, when and why.

5. Methods

Of the many methods available, we can consider four: anecdotes; interviewing; case methods; and experiments. Each of these major methods presents problems of control, and they will be emphasized here rather than the protocols of each kind of method.

In an underdeveloped and underorganized field, the anecdotal approach is likely to loom large. That approach also runs counter to many of the basic principles of scientific methods. The approach is atomistic rather than hollistic, the sample is wholly inadequate, and the point to the anecdote is likely to be ambiguous. Nevertheless, anecdotes may have a value. Some cultures, such as those of the Middle East place a very high value on anecdotes.

The most common method is interviewing. This also presents basic problems from the rigorous point of view of hard science. Is the sample adequate in size and representative in quality? We must trust the respondents, but be aware they may be lying. In intercultural communication research, we are not always sure that those respondents with the least social vulnerability are likely to be the most credible. We also are not sure in general how to phrase the questions. The principles vary from culture

to culture, but there may be some pan-cultural constants.

Surprisingly, there are very few good case descriptions of intercultural communication in the literature. Some fields such as anthropology, business, and law are known for their reliance on cases. Business and law are both applied fields much as intercultural communication still seems to be. Yet we have few good case descriptions of intercultural communication. This is one of the most pressing needs.

The classic method of science is experimentation. This permits the greatest control of observations, variables, and reactions. The literature on experiments in intercultural communication is scant indeed. There are, of course, problems in experimenting with human subjects of different cultures, but many other kinds of experiments in social psychology and in other disciplines have been successfully conducted. Experiments in intercultural communication may seem artifical, but they could be crucial for research and theory in this area.

Whatever the method, the findings need to be validated. This calls for replication and evaluation. The latter can be performed by neutral panels such as the science courts that have been used in other fields.

6. Resources

The principal organizations in the field, such as SIETAR and ICA, to which the most active researchers and theorists in the area belong, provide journals, newsletters, and other means by which anyone can fairly easily learn what may be available on a particular point.

Through these and other organizations substantial bibliographic

work in this area is available. The work of George Renwick and of Seelye and Tyler has already been mentioned. In addition, the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) contained valuable summaries of related research in cultural anthropology. ERIC contains abstracts and full reports of psychological, linguistic, and educational books, articles, and reports. The books most oriented to research and theory in intercultural communication are, among others, E. T. Hall's Beyond Culture, and texts by Condon, Harms, Samovar and Porter, Sitaram, and others. The principal periodical in this field is Dan Lander's new International Journal of Intergroup Relations.

7. Predictions

As each people in the world comes to realize more and more that there are other peoples in the world besides themselves, and as the amount of intercultural communication increases, research on this process is likely to increase as well. More and more of this research will be collaborative. Westerners and non-Westerners will work together in studying the same problems and phenomena. Their goals and concerns are likely to be quite different. The non-Westerners may be interested in preserving their traditions and in their own development. If the Westerners are not interested in pursuing those goals, they will find the non-Westerners uncooperative. By the same token, if the non-Westerners do not appreciate the more academic interests of the Westerners, they may find the Westerners uncooperative. Collaborative research will be much more than a cozy togetherness. It is likely to be a

series of adjustments and breakdowns.

The theories of the future are also likely to be based on research that emphasizes statistical models that are sometimes avoided today. When drawing samples from different cultures, there are special problems in the comparability of these samples. It may be necessary to use stratified sampling in one culture and block sampling in another.

Finally, there may be differences in the interpretations of findings. The same research may lead to one theory in one culture and to another in another culture. Even now many non-Westerners are beginning to criticize the interpretations we make of studies we have conducted. Perhaps these studies should have been conducted in another way or interpreted differently. We can look to the day when all research may be adjudicated by one party or another on an informal basis, or by formally created special bodies. In a sense, all research and theory will be more and more accountable to more and more interest groups. The allocation of resources for research and theory, and the utilization of this research and theory is likely to come under closer scrutiny by managers, legislators, and the public.

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